OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

Miss Churchill's Twins

by ELIZABETH JORDAN

THE old clock in the library struck ten. Simultaneously, Miss Eleanor Churchill laid down the book she was reading, removed her glasses from her aristocratic nose, and leaned back in her chair with an air of quiet expectation.

She knew that in exactly five minutes Anne, her faithful servant, would enter the room to push back the half-burned logs in the open fireplace, and cover them with ashes, to restore to its proper location and angle any piece of furniture that had been moved ever so slightly during the day, and to turn off the electric light. She knew that Anne would finally approach her at the reading-table with resolute and respectful mien. If she so far forgot herself as to remain immersed in her book after the curfew stroke of ten, Anne would remain rigid, with reproach so sternly banished from her countenance as to make her voiceless censure almost loud enough to create an echo. If she were not reading, as in this instance, Anne would stretch her hand toward the reading-lamp as a signal that her mistress could make her exit before she turned off the light. This was the Routine in Miss Churchill's home, and Routine there was implacably exigent.

To-night, Miss Churchill arose alertly at the signal. When she reached the threshold she and the light went out together. In the central hall, beyond the library, there was a dim illumination. This enabled her to reach without any disaster the chamber opposite, which was her bedroom. She paused a moment after opening the door, to regard pensively its peaceful interior. She had seen it so many times before, yet to-night it seemed different. Was it, perhaps, because she herself was different? She felt that it was.

Her bed was an invitation to repose, with its upper sheet smoothly folded back, and the pillows in position. All electric light was adjusted above it, at an angle to meet the needs of a recumbent reader. On the floor stood her slippers awaiting her feet. They almost seemed to move toward her as she looked at them, so assured and compelling was their mute invitation. Across the foot-board lay her wrapper—a luxurious thing of soft lavender silk. The silver on the dressing-case seemed to throw out a glimmer of welcome. Beyond, through the open door of the bath-room, the large monogramed towels hung in decorous readiness from the glass bars of the racks. Everything radiated comfort and luxury, as well as exquisite orderliness. Yet Miss Churchill felt dissatisfied and restless. Even luxury and comfort spelled Routine, and in this unwonted moment of rebellion she experienced an almost savage revolt against Routine.

With a deference that was part of Routine, Anne passed her and entered the room. There was one thing more to be done—the last: to draw down the green shades over the soft lace that covered the windows. Anne did it, like a priceless automaton. Miss Churchill did not like to see these severe parallelograms making unsympathetic panels in her dainty bedroom before her preparations for bed demanded their presence. This small function, too, was Routine. Were she to awaken from a stupor to behold Anne lowering these shades, a clock could not have told her the time more accurately.

In this present instance, Anne shut out, by the green shades, a pretty picture of whirling snowflakes, athwart the ruddy gleam thrown on the outer darkness from the brightly illuminated windows of her neighbor. Then Anne turned, her stolid Routine face softening. This time, in which she prepared her beloved mistress for bed, was the hour when she was allowed to talk over trivial events of the day with the freedom of a privileged old servitor. She bent to remove Miss Churchill's shoes, as her mistress sank into a chair, and rested her gray head comfortably against its cushioned back. This, too, was Routine.

"Anne," she asked, with an abruptness which was not Routine, "how old am I?"

Anne's response seemed of the very essence of her systematic and correct being.

"Fifty-six, the eighteenth of last August, Miss Eleanor."

Miss Churchill's gray eyes widened in surprise.

"Fifty-six!" she exclaimed. "Really? Why, Anne, that's old! But, do you know," she went on, musingly, "I don't feel as old as that. Do I look it?"

"Ye do not, ma'am," declared Anne. The disclaimer seemed almost passionate, for her. She rose to get the wrapper, and then stood gazing down on the other woman with shrewd, affectionate eyes.

"Ye could call yourself forty, Miss Eleanor, and nobody would doubt it. To be sure," she added, with simple sincerity, "yer hair's gray. But whose wouldn't be these days, with the airships and autymobiles flyin' about, ready to drop on us all, to say nothin' of the nervous strain of livin', that the doctors talk about."

Miss Churchill laughed, a little self-consciously.

"I'm afraid I can't claim to be a victim of nervous strain, Anne," she said, demurely. "I'm too easy-going. I do nothing! I'm letting myself stagnate. We're in the back water. The truth is"—she seemed to be making the confession to herself more than to Anne—"I'm getting horribly selfish."

"Selfish! You! Listen to that! Anne seemed to evoke repudiation from invisible defenders of truth. "You, that does more for the poor than any other woman in the city! You, that gives away hospital beds, an' college courses, an' libraries——"

"Oh, wait, Anne!" Miss Churchill put up a slender, protesting hand, as she rose to be undressed. "No libraries, thus far," she added, as the other's deft fingers unfastened hooks and buttons. "Only a few books. But, really, Anne, I'm getting into a dreadful rut. You must see it. Three meals a day, a conventional drive in the afternoon, a few conventional calls, church—I hope not too conventional—an occasional contribution to some worthy cause. That's my life. It isn't enough. How long have we been living like this?"

"Twenty years, Miss Eleanor." The old servant's tone was a trifle unsympathetic. She liked "living like this" very well. She knew just how much she had to do, and she did it, with purring intervals.

"Twenty years! Anne!" Miss Churchill drew herself up so suddenly that the staid servant was startled. "Anne, we need young society. If I had young nieces and nephews, I would invite them here for—for years," she added, desperately. "But I haven't. I think"—there was a moment of pregnant silence; then the words came with deliberate hardihood—"Anne, I think I'll adopt a baby!"

A baby! Yes. With the words, Miss Churchill's vision widened; took in far horizons. A baby would interrupt the Routine. It was hardly too much to hope that a baby might shatter it to bits, and then rebuild it nearer to the heart's desire. A baby would certainly be sweet and cuddlesome; something one would care for; something one could love.

Anne let Miss Churchill's wrapper drop from her nerveless hands. The action was equivalent to hysterics in anybody else. Then, without a word, she stooped, picked it up with trembling fingers, and put it on her mistress.

"There, there, Miss Eleanor," she said, soothingly, having found her voice. "It's tired ye are an' out of sorts, or such idees wouldn't be comin' into yer mind. Take a nice hot bath before ye go to bed, an' in the morning ye'll feel better."

Miss Churchill laughed a little as she sat down on the side of the bed and continued her train of thought. She had a sudden exultant sense of freedom. She was doing something unusual. She was breaking the Routine!

"Of course," she mused, dallying with the eloquent theme, "one child would be very lonely here, with no one around her—or him (I don't know which it will be)—but me and a few old servants. Very lonely. M-m-m-m," she reflected, "I might adopt two—a boy and a girl! They would be company for each other. Two boys might be better—no, two girls."

Even Miss Churchill's suddenly stimulated imagination halted this side of the picture of two small boys being company for each other in her peaceful abode. It was all very well to destroy the Routine, but she did not wish her home destroyed. Home had not palled on her. "Two girls," she said again, positively. "And yet,"—her spoken thoughts ran on, regardless of the dazed, bewildered listener before her—"they might be so different; they might not agree—I have it!"

She sprang to her feet, and clutched Anne's shoulder in her excitement.

"Anne!" she exclaimed, "I'll adopt twins!"

"Is it a fever ye have, Miss Eleanor?"

Anne's voice was breathless with fright as she laid quivering fingers on her mistress' brow.

"Get into bed now, and lie still, that's a dear, an' I'll get the doctor right off."

Miss Churchill crept docilely between the sheets. Then she laughed again, this time with a kind of abandon. She seemed to hear the Routine crumbling audibly before her insurgency.

"Poor Anne!" she murmured. "I don't wonder it startles you. After twenty such years as we've had. And coming so suddenly, too. But don't get the doctor yet. I won't need him till morning, and then only to advise me to what institution I ought to apply. Why, Anne, shake your mind up a bit and see what a beautiful idea it is! Only think of it! Two little toddling darlings around, to brighten this gloomy old house, and cheer us up. We everything to them, and they just grateful, untaxing factors in our happiness."

Anne groaned. "It's cheerin' up I'll need, bad, if we've two toddlin' babies around this house," she predicted, bitterly. "An' who'll take care of them?" she added, after a moment's silence, as if realizing at last that, horrible as this thing seemed, it might not be a passing nightmare. Her mistress was certainly awake. She could not flatter herself that she was not, also.

"A nurse!" Miss Churchill's response was prompt and enthusiastic. "I'll hire some one to take care of them who knows all about children. We don't. But we can love them and enjoy them. One doesn't have to learn that!"

"What'll we do when they have measles an' scarlet-fever, an' dipthery? Both at wance?"

Miss Churchill did not reply. Anne struck again.

"An' pneumony, an' infant paral'sis!" she added, deliberately, following up her advantage. Miss Churchill frowned and closed her eyes. With how many infantile ailments was Anne acquainted?

"If you're going to talk that way I think I'll go to sleep," she said, with hurt dignity. "Turn off the light, close the door softly, and try to be in a better frame of mind in the morning. Good-night, Anne."

Anne went, with a heavy heart. She dared not linger, and as there was nothing else to do, she, too, went to bed. For hours she turned upon her couch, vainly wooing sleep, her sluggish imagination stirring as it had not stirred for years. But when, at last, sleep came, it brought in its wake an entire orphan asylum, whose happy members frolicked over her couch, tramped thoughlessly, but by no means lightly, over her stomach, and jumped upon her head until she groaned aloud in anguish.

In her own room, Miss Churchill was dreaming, too; but her dreams were waking dreams and pleasant ones—dreams of dainty little girls, with silky golden locks, tied up with fresh, carelessly knotted pink bows, who would cuddle at her feet and mother their dolls, or who would sit with contained rapture by her side when she went forth to drive. Two girls they must be—on that point she was now resolute. One dark, one fair; that would be nice, if that would not be asking too much. Of excellent blood, of course, with no hereditary taints. Pretty, too—this went without saying. Above and beyond all—twins. Yes, most certainly, twins. With her mind firmly fixed on this decision, Miss Churchill finally fell asleep.

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"When you have their adenoids cut out, send for me, dear." The speaker was Mrs. Henry Wallace, a friend of Miss Churchill, and a lady whose opinions were to be considered. Mrs. Wallace had come to call, on hearing of the impending twins, and, like Miss Churchill's entire circle of friends, was heartening her for adopted children by much and various counsel.

"Twins; Yes, That Was It."

"Their adenoids?" Miss Churchill gasped. "But I haven't even chosen the children yet. What makes you think they will have adenoids, Sarah?"

"Why, they always do," Mrs. Wallace retorted with brusque authority. "And, remember, Dr. Bosman is the best man in the city for them. The children like him, and he has such pretty animals for them to play with—indestructible Noah's Arks, you know, and things like that. As soon as you've selected the children we'll go to him. I really could not allow you to neglect that vital point. This is the day of the child, and—"

Mrs. George Prescott, who had dropped in with Mrs. Wallace, broke in at this point.

"Pardon me, Sarah," she said. "But education is a matter to be considered even more than adenoids! What school have you chosen for the children Eleanor?"

Miss Churchill gasped again.

"Why none, yet," she faltered. "I hadn't even thought of it. I—they probably won't be more than two years old when I get them, you know. That's the age I prefer."

"But you must enter their names, now of course," explained Mrs. Prescott, majestically. "Then there may be an opening for them in the school you choose by the time they are ready to go. In all the fashionable schools the applications are years and years ahead of the vacancies. My sister's child was born last week, and the very next day Helen entered her for Bromley, so they can take her in when she's ten. Just as fathers put the boy babies up for the right clubs, you know."

Miss Churchill looked worried. "I didn't know all that was necessary. Of course," she added, humbly, "there is much I don't know."

"Naturally."

The two ladies looked convinced and sympathetic.

"It's important with girls," Mrs. Prescott went on. "This is the day of the child, and of special child-culture. But it's really vital in the case of boys. My nephew, Harry Blossom, was put up for Prackleton when he was born, so he got in at eleven. When he was ready for college he entered with a dozen of his mates; and you can see the advantage. The Prackleton boys, standing together as they did, had things all their own way, and practically ran the entire college while they were there. Harry said it was so gratifying!"

"If their adenoids aren't taken out they won't do much at Bromley, or anywhere else," predicted Mrs. Wallace, gloomily. "And the adenoids come before college. No education is necessary to have them. I wish you could hear the lamentations of the unfortunate mothers who have neglected their children in that respect. I went to a luncheon yesterday that lasted three hours. The only things the women talked about were adenoids and flesh reduction. Whenever I see a particularly depressed-looking woman I say to myself, 'There's a mother who has it on her soul that she has neglected her child's adenoids.'"

"I won't," promised Miss Churchill. "Indeed I won't. I'm so glad you mentioned it. Do little boys have them, too?"

"Naturally. You are inexperienced, Eleanor," Mrs. Wallace continued, with a sort of Spartan severity, "but you mean well, and I hope you will make a success of the experiment. It's a risk, however, my dear. You must feel yourself that it's a risk."

She rose to go, and her silk draperies seemed to rustle apprehensively. Mrs. Prescott followed her example.

"Call on me for any further help I can give you," the latter added, graciously. "In this day of the child, if I may call it so—"

"You may," interrupted Miss Churchill; "I see that it is. I am wondering how it could have escaped my notice until now."

As they descended the stone steps leading from the front door to the street the two women met Mrs. Arthur Burchard, about to mount them. She stopped.

"Is it true," she asked, eagerly, "that Eleanor is going to adopt a child? Or two children?"

The ladies bowed assent with pregnant meaning.

"Twins!" Mrs. Wallace rubbed it in, gustily. Mrs. Burchard's face puckered with a sort of worried solemnity.

"Then I must see her," she said, "though I really haven't time to-day, with a lecture and three committee meetings. But dear Eleanor will sadly need the benefit of my experience."

Care veiled her features when she greeted Miss Churchill five minutes later.

"There's one thing I want to impress on you, Eleanor," she explained, impressively, after they had chatted a few moments about the proposed experiment, "and I felt I must make you feel this before you chose the children. Know their family. Know them! I can't put it too strongly. You may need their help and their advice. Three years ago I noticed a certain trait in my little Frederic. It was not one I recognized as belonging to his father's family or mine. I could not handle it. I was in the dark. I consulted others in vain. What did I do? I traveled six thousand miles to see his grandmother's sister, and it was worth while. For when I got there she remembered that a great-uncle of hers had had that same trait! Do you see how it carries?"

Miss Churchill looked alarmed, as well she might. To one so fixed in her daily habit of life that she had not spent a night away from home in fifteen years, the prospect of a jaunt to seek relations several generations away from her twins, and thousands of miles away from herself, was a strain. She thanked Mrs. Burchard warmly, but with certain mental reservations, and that lady, her duty done, beamed on her encouragingly. She felt moved to ask if the information Mrs. Burchard acquired led to beneficial treatment of Frederic's inherited trait. But her visitor went on, briskly.

"This is the day of the child," she said, "and we have to approach its problems very seriously. What dancing-school have you selected for the twins?"

Miss Churchill was used to surprises, but this one was almost a shock. She rose to it, however, with a specious levity.

"Do they have to have that, too?" she asked, laughing. "Poor little mites! I didn't know. You see, they will be only two years—"

"Not a day too young," Mrs. Burchard spoke with deep conviction. "They take to it at two, as fish take to water. They're too young to be self-conscious, so they dance as soon as they walk, and as easily. That's the new theory. They acquire instinctive grace. It's the same with languages. They must begin French as soon as they begin to speak English. I suggest Miss Benson's class for the dancing. She's wonderful with babies. Shall I speak to her, and reserve places for them?"

Mrs. Burchard paused invitingly, her note-book open for an entry, her pencil poised above a virgin sheet.

"Thank you so much; you're more than kind. But I think I won't enter them just yet. First, catch your hare! They are not entered with me, yet. I don't even know what their names will be. Wouldn't that be a little embarrassing? Miss Churchill's two nameless girls!"

Miss Churchill spoke more smartly than she felt. A disheartening sense of responsibility was settling upon her. Her friend looked disappointed.

"Very well," she acquiesced; "but, remember, it's a vital question. Miss Benson's class is extremely difficult to enter. She's under obligations to me just now, and I could manage it. But she will have forgotten all about her obligations in another month; so don't lose time with the twins."

She hurried away, and Miss Churchill, feeling strangely depressed, sent for Anne and took a dose of aromatic spirits of ammonia. She was sipping this thoughtfully when Miss Matilda Vandam was announced. Miss Churchill rose to greet her with genuine pleasure. She liked the old teacher, whose successful methods with children had made her known on both sides of the Atlantic. She considered it a happy coincidence that Miss Vandam should choose just this time for one of her rare calls. From her, she knew, she would gain comfort and inspiration. She hastened to unfold her plan and the problems which it entailed upon her, known and unknown. Her caller listened with kindly interest in her brown eyes.

"But it is simple, what you have to do, the teacher said. "Do not let yourself be confused by those things which mean nothing. Two duties you will have toward your children, and two alone. First, love them."

Miss Churchill drew a long breath and sat up. "Ah! I can do that, I fancy," she beamed, happily.

"Second," continued the authority, "know God, that they may know Him."

Miss Churchill looked dazed.

"I don't quite understand," she faltered. "Do you mean that I must join some church? Attend regularly? And take the children—?"

The German interrupted her with a quick, repudiating gesture of the hand. "Oh, no!" she cried. "I speak of the essence, not of the form. Of the thing itself, not of the symbol. You must be a Christian. You must know God, that these children may know Him through you. You must fill your soul with Him. On that the development of their little souls will depend. That is all, but it is much, for this is the day of the child."

Miss Churchill wondered if anyone alive was ignorant of this last fact. When she was alone again she felt sick and dizzy. Still she clutched at her receding dream. More friends came, with more theories. They filled the days and evenings. They discussed child hygiene, education, psychology. They all held different views on each of these subjects. It was not until the following week, however, that Miss Churchill realized how great a change in her methodical life her new responsibilities would involve. Mrs. Vanderwater, a friend of many years' standing, and prominent in society, called to congratulate her on her plan, of which she had promptly heard. She began at once to expatiate on the broadening life that lay before Miss Churchill, looked at through the twins as a powerful binocular glass.

"Let me see," mused Mrs. Vanderwater, when they had discussed the preliminaries. "They will be making their debut about sixteen years from now. How old will you you be then, Eleanor?"

Eleanor winced and colored slightly.

"Well, I am past forty-five now," she said.

"Um! Sixty-five!" Mrs. Vanderwater laughed unfeelingly. "Not exactly the age at which one likes to play chaperon six nights a week, is it?" she asked, lightly. "It will mean a strain, Eleanor. But we needn't worry about that, yet. The real need is"—she became serious—"to build your fences now. You must begin to cultivate people with young children. You must go about more, entertain more. In other words you must prepare for the social future of your adopted daughters. You must plant the seed in their social garden."

"Good heavens, Katharine!" Miss Churchill's pale face flushed, her eyes glittered feverishly. "You talk as if the arrival of two helpless little children in this house would revolutionize my entire life. Really, it's absurd."

Mrs. Vanderwater regarded her pityingly.

"You don't mean that you fail to realize it will," she said, gently, but with repressed emphasis. "Do you imagine that you can fit them into place as you would a cabinet, and keep them there? They will mean a thousand changes. This is the day of the child. Its training is an infinitely complex thing. By the way, what rooms do you intend to set aside for their nursery? Four will do, I think—a bedroom for each, another for the nurse, and a nursery in common. Of course you will have all the rooms done over, with neutral-tinted walls and restful effects. No pictures will be needed, although there are wall treatments adapted to every age, and they are helpful. And very few toys. From time to time one picture can be put on the wall, and left there till the children have absorbed its beauty. Then another can be substituted for it. When you are ready to furnish, we will get Miss Sophia Carhart to study the children and make a harmonious living atmosphere for them. Something that will match the child and yet stimulate it rightly. In this day of the child—"

Miss Churchill rose, and looked as feeble as she felt.

"You will excuse me, won't you?" she asked, pleadingly, extending her hand. "But I feel quite ill. Somehow, all I've got to do for them is accumulating, till I begin to think that I'm doing it now, and it—it exhausts me. If you will kindly ring for Anne—"

The next day, Mr. Ray Norton, owner of the famous Foxhall Kennels, had a message by telephone. When he responded, a faint, quavering voice came to his ear over the wire.

"Is this you, Ray?" it asked. "This is Eleanor. We're so quiet here, and lonely, that I want to brighten up the house a little. I'm thinking of buying a puppy."

Ray Norton laughed.

"Want it for the twins, I suppose," he said, cheerfully. He, too, had heard much about those twins. "Well, I'll see what—"

"Oh, no, no!" The assurance was emphatic—almost feverish. "I'm not going to have twins. I have changed my mind about adopting any children. You see, this is the day of the child, and it seems to me it takes too many suns to light it up sufficiently. The poor things would be orphans before I had fulfilled half of my duties toward them. I'm going to give money to orphan asylums instead. I'll tell you all about it sometime. But now we are talking about puppies. Have you got a nice, kind—a nice, quiet kind that will live in a basket a good deal of the time? One that is fond of home life, and gets rather attached to one person? Anne likes that sort best, and so do I. You have? You will? Oh, thank you! And, Ray!"

"Yes, cousin Eleanor."

Mr. Norton got the words out with considerable difficulty. Then he laid his head on his desk and gurgled happily to himself.

"Don't tell anybody about the puppy," the tired voice went on. "And don't think I'm dreadfully changeable. The whole thing was a mistake. It—it was made because somehow I didn't quite realize how much this is the Day of the Child!"

"One pup will be enough, Eleanor? Not twins?" Mr. Norton could not resist this.

"One will be enough, Ray. I don't know so very much even about that. But, Ray, one thing I do want to be sure of. This—this isn't especially the day of the dog, is it?"

The simple pathos of the last words was too much for him. Mr. Ray Norton laid down the receiver.